Swan Lake

ballet by Tchaikovsky

Isabel Brodsky Britannica Editors Feb. 4, 2026 • History

Britannica AI

Ask Anything

Table of Contents

Swan Lake The Bolshoi Ballet performing the classical ballet Swan Lake; choreography by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov.

Top Questions

Who composed the ballet Swan Lake?

Swan Lake was composed by Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky in 1876. It was the first in his trilogy of ballets (the other two were *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*).

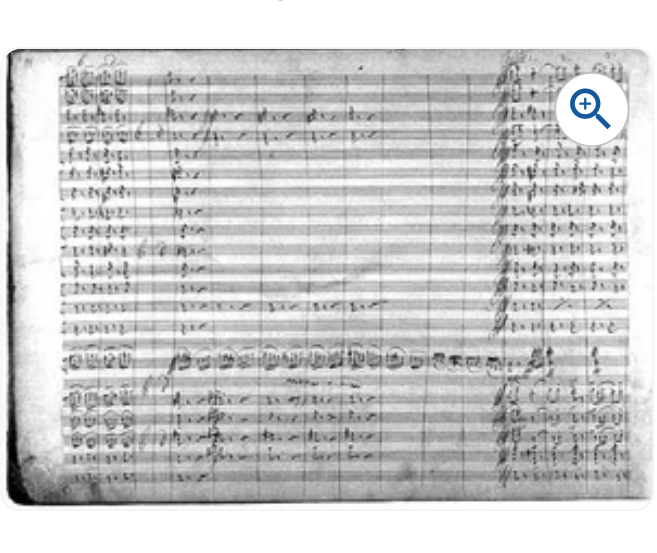
Who are the principal characters in Swan Lake?

Principal characters include Odette/White Swan/Swan Queen (a princess who turns into a swan during the day), Prince Siegfried (who falls in love with Odette), Baron Von Rothbart (a magician who has put a spell on Odette), and Odile/Black Swan (Von Rothbart's daughter, who impersonates Odette).

What is notable about the choreography of Swan Lake?

The choreography is notable for its intricate sequences, including the "Dance of the Cygnets" and the sequence of 32 *fouettés en tournant* performed by Odile.

Swan Lake, ballet composed in 1876 by Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. *Swan Lake* was revolutionary in its musical approach and was the first in Tchaikovsky's trilogy of ballets (the other two were *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*). Tchaikovsky's score for *Swan Lake* was based on a short ballet he composed in 1871 to entertain his nieces and nephews. He was commissioned to compose a full-length score in 1875. The story, written by librettists Vladimir Begichev and Vasily Geltser, is based on German and Russian folk legends about a hunter or woodsman who meets a swan maiden. The ballet debuted in March 1877 at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow with choreography by Julius Wenzel Reisinger.



***Swan Lake* autographed score** A page from an autographed score of *Swan Lake*, by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, 1876.

Swan Lake departed from traditional ballets, which at the time took the form of a series of divertissements, or short dances, without a narrative framework. Instead, *Swan Lake*'s symphonic score forms the musical backdrop to a dramatic plot. The original choreographer and dancers, however, struggled to keep up with the score, and the first production of the ballet was not a success. *Swan Lake* was revived in 1882 and gained popularity after an 1895 production by the Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, with new choreography by Lev Ivanov and Marius Petipa. In its present form (shorter than Tchaikovsky's original composition), it became one of the most performed ballets ever. Tchaikovsky, who was dismayed by the initial lack of enthusiasm for the ballet, did not live to see its eventual triumph—he died in 1893.

Principal roles

- **Odette/White Swan/Swan Queen:** A beautiful princess who is imprisoned by an enchantment that transforms her into a swan by day
- **Siegfried:** A handsome prince who falls in love with Odette and vows to be her true love
- **Baron Von Rothbart:** A magician who is a human-bird hybrid and who has put a spell on Odette and her companions
- **Odile/Black Swan:** Von Rothbart's daughter, who takes the form of Odette to trick Siegfried

The roles of Odette, dressed in white, and Odile, in black, are typically danced by the same ballerina. Other characters include Siegfried's mother and the swan maidens who accompany Odette.

Swan Lake Russian ballerina Maya Plisetskaya in *Swan Lake,* 1961.

Synopsis

Prologue

Odette meets Von Rothbart while walking by a lake. He casts a spell on her before she can escape, turning her into a swan.

Act I: Outside the palace

A party for Prince Siegfried's 21st birthday is interrupted by his mother, the queen, who tells him it is time he got married. She informs Siegfried that a ball will take place the next day and that many eligible princesses will be in attendance. Before leaving, she gifts her son a crossbow, and Siegfried heads out on a hunt.

Act II: The lakeside

Siegfried arrives at the lake, where he discovers a flock of swans. As he prepares to shoot one, it transforms into a beautiful woman: Odette, the swan queen. When Siegfried explains that he means her no harm, Odette reveals that she and the other swans have been cursed by Von Rothbart: They take the shape of swans by day and return to their human forms at night. The spell can be broken only if one who has never loved vows to love Odette eternally. Siegfried swears his undying devotion. Von Rothbart appears and Siegfried prepares to kill him, but he is stopped by Odette, who tells him that if the magician dies, the enchantment will become permanent. Von Rothbart escapes and Odette flees, followed by Siegfried.

The remaining swan maidens appear and dance a waltz. Siegfried returns, in pursuit of Odette. When she appears, they affirm their love until dawn breaks, and Odette transforms into a swan again.

***Swan Lake* as a Political Tool in Russia**

Russian state broadcasters have interrupted scheduled programming to play the ballet on a loop in times of political turmoil, such as after the death of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982 and during an attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991. In 2022 graffiti depicting the ballet's "Dance of the Cygnets" was used as a symbol of protest by Russians against their country's invasion of Ukraine. The independent broadcaster TV Rain, after being pressured to shut down by the government, ended coverage from within Russia by playing a clip from *Swan Lake*.

Explore Britannica Premium!
The trusted destination for professionals, college students, and lifelong learners.
SUBSCRIBE

Act III: Ballroom at the palace

Guests gather at the ball and Siegfried is presented with six princesses from whom he must choose a bride. He informs his mother that he cannot marry any of them. Two unexpected guests arrive—Von Rothbart and his daughter, Odile, whom he has transformed to look like Odette. Captivated, Siegfried declares that he will marry "Odette," inadvertently breaking his oath of eternal love to the real Odette. Moments later Odile and Von Rothbart reveal their true identities and show Siegfried a vision of a weeping Odette. Overcome by his error, the prince flees.

Swan Lake Paris Opera Ballet dancer Sylvie Guillem as the Black Swan in a production of *Swan Lake*, Paris, 1985.

Act IV: The lakeside

Back at the lake the swans grieve for their distressed and heartbroken queen. Siegfried arrives with explanations and apologies and is forgiven by Odette. His broken vow, however, cannot be undone. Odette, condemned to remain a swan, resolves to die. Von Rothbart arrives and attempts to drive Siegfried away so that Odette can be his. But Odette throws herself into the lake and Siegfried follows. This breaks the spell, and the spirits of the lovers are freed and united in death.

The swan maidens Dancers with the English National Ballet in *Swan Lake* at the London Coliseum, January 6, 2015.

Alternate versions

There are several interpretations of the ballet, particularly of the final act. Many productions dispense with the prologue, which was not in Tchaikovsky's original score. In some versions Siegfried defeats Von Rothbart, allowing him and Odette to live happily ever after. In others Siegfried and Odette survive but are separated. In a 1986 performance of *Swan Lake* by the Paris Opera Ballet, choreographed by Rudolf Nureyev, Von Rothbart killed Siegfried and took Odette away with him.

The popularity of *Swan Lake*

The enduring popularity of *Swan Lake* is rooted in its sweeping score. Among its most notable movements is the instantly recognizable "Swan Theme," which accompanies the appearance of Odette throughout the ballet. *Swan Lake* is also remarkable for its intricately choreographed and visually striking sequences featuring the corps de ballet of swan maidens. Particularly well-known is the "Dance of the Cygnets," in which four young swans dance in unison in a line with their arms crossed and their heads turned to the side.

The ballet features other popular dances, such as the pas de deux between Siegfried and Odile at the ball. The choreography is remarkable for the 32 *fouettés en tournant* ("whipped turns" done in place and on one leg) executed by Odile in the "coda" (or final section) of the pas de deux. The feat originated as part of Odile's choreography by the Italian prima ballerina Pierina Legnani, who added it for the 1895 Mariinsky Theatre production of *Swan Lake*.

Swan Lake is referenced in films such as *Funny Girl* (1968), in which Barbra Streisand dances in a parody of the ballet. A scene from the ballet is featured in *The Courier* (2020). *Black Swan* (2010), directed by Darren Aronofsky, is centered on a production of the ballet and stars Natalie Portman as the White Swan and Mila Kunis as the Black Swan. The ballet is also referenced several times in the stage musical *Billy Elliot the Musical* and its film adaptation (2000); in the climactic scene, the title character dances in *Swan Lake*.

Isabel Brodsky

---

ballet

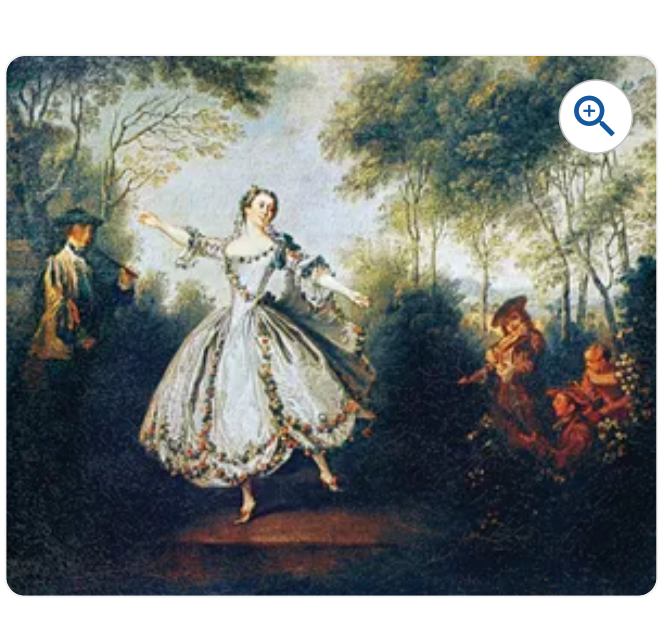
dance

Ivor Guest • All Britannica Editors Feb. 4, 2026 • History

Britannica AI

Ask Anything Quick Summary

Table of Contents



La Camargo Dancing *La Camargo Dancing*, oil painting of Marie-Anne Camargo by Nicolas Lancret, 1730; in ...(more)

Top Questions

What is ballet?

Where and when did ballet begin?

What are some basic ballet positions and movements?

What do ballet dancers wear during practice and performances?

Show more

ballet, theatrical dance in which a formal academic dance technique—the danse d'école—is combined with other artistic elements such as music, costume, and stage scenery. The academic technique itself is also known as ballet. This article surveys the history of ballet.

History through 1945

The emergence of ballet in the courts of Europe

Ballet traces its origins to the Italian Renaissance, when it was developed as a court entertainment. During the 15th and 16th centuries the dance technique became formalized. The epicentre of the art moved to France following the marriage of the Italian-born aristocrat Catherine de Médicis to Henry II of France. A court musician and choreographer named Balthasar de Beaujoyeulx devised *Ballet comique de la reine* (1581; "The Queen's Comic Ballet"), which inaugurated a long tradition of court ballets in France that reached its peak under Louis XIV in the mid-17th century.

As a court entertainment, the works were performed by courtiers; a few professional dancers were occasionally participants, but they were usually cast in grotesque or comic roles. The subjects of these works, in which dance formed only a part alongside declamation and song, ranged widely; some were comic and others had a more serious, even political, intent. Louis XIII and his son Louis XIV frequently performed in them; the younger Louis was in time regarded as the epitome of the noble style of dancing as it developed at the French court.

Eventually, developments at the French court pushed the arts aside, and the court ballet disappeared. But Louis XIV had established two academies where ballet was launched into another phase of its development: the Académie Royale de Danse (1661) and the Académie Royale de Musique (1669). The Académie Royale de Danse was formed to preserve the classical school of the noble dance. It was to last until the 1780s. By then its purpose essentially had been abrogated by the music academy, the predecessor of the dance school of the Paris Opéra.

Ballet as an adjunct to opera

The Académie Royale de Musique was to become incalculably significant in the development of ballet. The academy was created to present opera, which was then understood to include a dance element; indeed, for fully a century ballet was a virtually obligatory component of the various forms of French opera. From the beginning, the dancers of the Opéra (as the Académie was commonly known) were professional, coming under the authority of the ballet master. A succession of distinguished ballet masters (notably Pierre Beauchamp, Louis Pécour, and Gaétan Vestris) ensured the prestige of French ballet, and the quality of the Opéra's dancers became renowned throughout Europe.

The growing appeal of ballet to an increasingly broad public in Paris was reflected in the success of *opéra-ballets*, of which the most celebrated were André Campra's *L'Europe galante* (1697; "Gallant Europe") and Jean-Philippe Rameau's *Les Indes galantes* (1735; "The Gallant Indies"). These works combined singing, dancing, and orchestral music into numbers that were unified by a loose theme.

In the early years the most accomplished dancers were male, and it was not until 1681 that the first principal female dancer, Mlle La Fontaine, appeared. Gradually she and her successors became nearly as well-known and respected as male dancers such as Michel Blondy and Jean Balon. From the 1720s, however, with the appearance of Marie Sallé and Marie-Anne Camargo, the women began to vie with the men in technique and artistry. The retirement of Sallé and Camargo in turn coincided with the debut of one of the most celebrated dancers of all time, Gaétan Vestris, who became regarded in his prime as the epitome of the French noble style; he played an important part in establishing ballet as an independent theatrical form.

Key People: Igor Youskevitch • Auguste Vestris • Pina Bausch • Yvonne Chouteau • Claudic...(Show more)

Related Topics: court ballet • character dance • opéra-ballet • coreodramma • battu

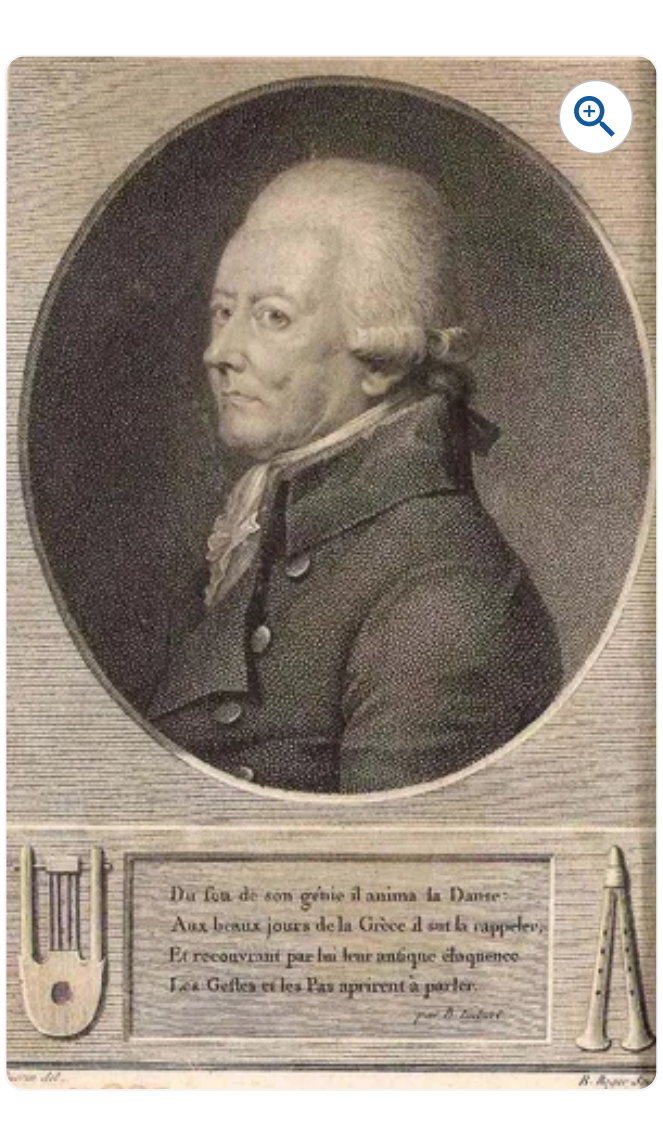
On the Web: Pressbooks Create - Storytelling - The History of Ballet (Feb. 04, 2026)

See all related content

Explore Britannica Premium!
The trusted destination for professionals, college students, and lifelong learners.
SUBSCRIBE

The establishment of the *ballet d'action*

Ballet remained subservient to vocal music at the Paris Opéra until the 1770s, but elsewhere—and even in Paris—enlightened ballet masters had been experimenting with a genre in which dance was allied with mime to form a new type of theatrical work known as the *ballet d'action*. Its origin can be traced back at least to 1717, when in London John Weaver produced *The Loves of Mars and Venus*, which he claimed echoed the pantomimes of ancient Rome. This was the forerunner of several pioneering attempts to weave dance and mime into a narrative work, notably by Franz Hilverding and Gasparo Angiolini in Vienna and Jean-Baptiste de Hesse and Antoine Pitrot in Paris (on other stages than the Opéra). It fell to the French choreographer and writer Jean-Georges Noverre to establish the genre of the *ballet d'action* in the public consciousness.


Du feu de son génie il anima la Danse
Aux beaux jours de la Grèce il osa la rappeler,
Et recouvrant par lui leur antique éloquence
Les Gestes et les Pas apprirent à parler.

Jean-Georges Noverre Jean-Georges Noverre, frontispiece from his *Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets* (1760).

At the Opéra-Comique in Paris Noverre produced in 1754 a remarkable ballet on a Chinese theme that earned him an engagement in London. There Noverre was befriended by the actor David Garrick, who became an important influence in his artistic development. In 1760, at the court of Württemberg (now in Germany), he produced a series of major works in which he realized his personal vision of the *ballet d'action*. The most celebrated of these was *Médée et Jason*, in which Gaétan Vestris played Jason. Noverre's fame spread throughout Europe. After Württemberg he was employed in Vienna, where Empress Maria Theresa recommended him to her daughter, Queen Marie-Antoinette of France, for the post of ballet master at the Paris Opéra.

Noverre's brief engagement at the Opéra was a turning point of the greatest significance. Gaétan Vestris, a dominant figure there, espoused the cause of the *ballet d'action*. Although the other ballet masters, Jean Dauberval and Maximilien Gardel, forced Noverre out of the organization, they were no less committed to the new genre he had introduced.

Noverre's fame also derived from his writings, notably *Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets* (1760), one of the classics of dance literature, in which he drew attention to the shortcomings of the ballet of his time and set down his ideas for reforming his art and explained his vision of the *ballet d'action*.

The age of Gardel

Until the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, the Paris Opéra remained closely linked to the court. The revolution put an end to such support. The turn of the 19th century was a time of confusion for the arts, during which ballet gained greatly in popularity and prestige at the expense of its sister art, opera. Ballet's success was largely a consequence of the personal effort of the ballet master Pierre Gardel (Maximilien's brother), who dominated French ballet from 1787 to 1827. Gardel was not only an experienced administrator but also a choreographer, esteemed throughout Europe. In Paris he staged many ballets from a wide variety of genres, from Classical legend (*Psyché*, 1790) to comedy (*La Dansomanie*, 1800) and contemporary fiction (*Paul et Virginie*, 1806). He was most ably supported by Louis Milon, who himself produced a number of masterpieces, including the tear-jerking *Nina, ou la folle par amour* (1813; "Nina, or Mad by Love") and the boisterous *Le Carnaval de Venise, ou la constance à l'épreuve* (1816; "The Carnival of Venice, or The Test of Constancy"). Under Gardel's rule the dominance of the Paris ballet was recognized throughout Europe for its ballet productions, for dancers such as Marie Gardel, Emilia Bigottini, and Louis Duport, and for superior teachers such as Jean-François Coulon.

Meanwhile, ballet had also taken root in other European cities, most notably in Vienna and in Italian cities such as Milan and Naples. The outstanding Italian choreographer of this era was Salvatore Viganò, who endeavoured to mold dance and silent drama to a greater extent than any other choreographer of his time. His most celebrated work was his definitive version of the Prometheus legend, *Prometeo* (1813), which reused much of Ludwig van Beethoven's ballet music for the Vienna State Opera (*Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus*, 1801; *The Creatures of Prometheus*). Among other celebrated choreographers working in Italy at this time were Gaetano Gioja and the French-born Louis Henry.

Ballet as an aspect of Romanticism

The world changed fast after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. The base of the Parisian theatregoing public was broadening with the rise of a wealthy middle class, while in matters of artistic taste the younger generation rejected the neoclassical preferences of their elders and surrendered to the growing vogue for Romanticism. Ballet itself would be radically changed. After the fall of the Bourbon monarchy in 1830, the Opéra was privatized, and its new management opened the door to Romanticism with Giacomo Meyerbeer's opera *Robert le Diable* (1831; "Robert the Devil") and Filippo Taglioni's ballet, *La Sylphide* (1832; "The Sylph"). The latter, which became the prototype for many other ballets with a spirit as heroine, established the fame of Filippo Taglioni's daughter, Marie Taglioni, the most eminent ballerina of her generation. Trained by Coulon and polished by her father, Taglioni had a style that set her apart from her contemporaries; she projected a spiritual quality that was said to touch the soul, and her virtuosity was subjugated to the creation of mood.

Marie Taglioni Marie Taglioni, c. 1850.

The years from about 1830 to 1850 were a golden age for ballet. Taglioni was followed by other great stars, who like her enjoyed international renown, including the Austrian Fanny Elssler. Elssler was famed for character dances such as the Spanish *cachucha*, and she had a dramatic flair that was evident in Joseph Mazilier's *La Gipsy* (1839) and Jules Perrot's *La Esmeralda* (1844). After Elssler came Carlotta Grisi, who created the title role in *Giselle* (1841), a ballet that remains, somewhat modified, in the 21st-century repertoire.

The age was dominated by the ballerina at the expense of the male dancer. Women's technique became increasingly virtuosic, largely as a result of the development of pointe work (i.e., dancing on the toes). In the last third of the 19th century, ballet in Paris was in artistic decline; the only work of merit to survive was Arthur Saint-Léon's *Coppélia* (1870).

One centre in which the male dancer held his own was Copenhagen, where the Paris-trained August Bournonville directed the ballet for many years. He produced many ballets, including his own version of *La Sylphide* (1836) and *Napoli* (1842); both of these have remained in the repertoire into the 21st century, and both convey an authentic flavour of the Romantic style.

London was another important centre of ballet at this time, but there ballet was largely an imported form, dominated by visiting stars from the Continent and by French choreographers. Outstanding among these was Jules Perrot, who produced a string of masterworks, including *La Esmeralda* (1844) and the all-star *Pas de Quatre* (1845). However, the great flowering of ballet in London was to be of short duration, and some 80 years were to pass before the first stirrings of a truly English ballet tradition were felt.

The Imperial Russian Ballet

As the 19th century drew to a close, the centre of ballet activity moved to St. Petersburg, where the art was supported by the bottomless resources at the disposal of the tsar. Nevertheless, ballet remained an exotic import from western Europe, and the only production of note with a Russian theme was Arthur Saint-Léon's *The Little Humpbacked Horse* (1864). Saint-Léon was one of a line of French ballet masters who worked in Russia; he was preceded by Perrot and succeeded by Marius Petipa. Petipa dominated the Russian ballet from 1870 to 1903, virtually replenishing the repertoire with ballets of his own. Several of these have survived to form the basic ballet classics into the 21st century: not only the three ballets to scores by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky—*The Sleeping Beauty* (1890), *The Nutcracker* (1892), and *Swan Lake* (1895; Petipa's assistant, Lev Ivanov, set the lakeside acts)—but also an earlier work, *La Bayadère* (1877; "The [Hindu] Temple Dancer"), and a later one, *Raymonda* (1898). Petipa also ensured the survival of *Giselle*.

The Imperial Ballet paid great attention to the training of its dancers, and an essentially Russian style emerged in the company. The Italian style taught by Enrico Cecchetti and the French style taught by Christian Johansson together formed the foundation for the Russian school that was to become dominant in 20th-century ballet.

Load Next Page